Roskilde University

Childcare in uncaring times

emotional processes in a nursery and their political context

Gitz-Johansen, Thomas

Published in:
Journal of Psycho-Social Studies

DOI:
10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Gitz-Johansen, T. (2020). Childcare in uncaring times: emotional processes in a nursery and their political context. *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies*, *13*(3), 263-276. https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact rucforsk@kb.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 05. May. 2023

Childcare in uncaring times: Emotional processes in a nursery and their political context

The following article reports from an institutional observation study of a Danish nursery for the 0-3 year olds.[1] The article explores links between emotional processes within the nursery and the larger societal context, which can largely be described as neo-liberal due to its combination of decreased public spending, a marked-like system of competition over, and increased evaluation and control of public services. While the structure of modern welfare institutions such as public childcare institutions may have produced increased centralised quality control and increased control with public spending the study shows that the present structure of professional childcare may in some ways be antithetical to the nature of care-work. The contemporary Danish welfare state has been called "the competition state" (Pedersen 2011) and the Danish society has recently been described as "the performance society" (Petersen 2016). The study shows that in important ways the principles of competition and performance create a less visible underside of a lack of recognition of and care for the emotional and psychological needs of young children and their professional carers. The study discusses how contemporary political focus on values such as increased performance, quality control, competence development, and cost effectiveness has created a *cultural shadow* (Page 1999, p. 133), which consists of the unrecognized needs and struggles of both children and staff in nurseries.

The article first gives a short presentation of some of the political structures that shapes the contemporary field of public day-care in Denmark. These are a dominant day-care paradigm of learning and competence development, the creation of a marked-like field of competition and resource-allocation, an increased focus on evaluation and quality control, and a focus on increasing the cost-effectives and decreasing the spending of public institutions. The study traces how such developments on the structural level have added pressure on the staff, while failing to recognize the care-needs of young children. Lastly, the article argues that in the field of public day-care, the needs of the children as well of their carers ought to receive more attention and recognition, and it is suggested that an institutional layer of care and support should surround the children as well as their professional carers.

Recent Developments in Public Childcare in Denmark

In Denmark, the care for young children has largely become the responsibility of professional carers outside of the family. In 2013 the share of children in day-care was 19% for children under 1 year, 91% for children aged 1-2 years, and 97% for children of 3-5 years (NOSOKO 2014, p. 58). Children normally start in school at the age of six, and as these statistics show almost all of them will have spent four or five years in day-care. Most young children in day-care are cared for in public institutions (87%) while the parents are at work, and a minority are cared for by private child-minders (13 %) (Weber, Krog and Larsen 2019, p. 20). The political and administrative development during the past three to four decades can roughly be described as

[1] I would like to thank Professor Linda Andersen and Professor Betina Dybbroe for their valuable comments to the manuscript.

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

neoliberal, due to the combination of decreased public spending, market-like mechanisms, and increased administrative control with institutions (Apple 2006, p. 473). Below I will give a short account of these developments, since they each influence on the practical and emotional life in the nursery in which I did the fieldwork.

A language of learning: Until relatively recently, the field of day-care was not an object of detailed political regulation, but in 2004 the government implemented a kind of national curriculum for preschool institutions called "The Pedagogical Learning Plans for Day-care" ("Loven om Pædagogiske Læreplaner i Dagtilbud"). According to Johansen, the learning plans were primarily devised and implemented due to a political wish to promote better results in national and international tests in the school system, which was believed to increase the nation's competitiveness in the global economy (Johansen 2020, p. 12). The implementation of the learning plans meant an important shift in the dominant political discourse about the care for pre-school children. Earlier, public child-care was a separate area of policy and professional knowledge, but from 2004 the area was regarded as a preparation for school, and the school-focus of learning became the central paradigm for childcare as well, and day-care institutions were now regarded as the first stage of a child's career of "lifelong learning". (Andersen 2014, p. 89)[2]

The creation of "a childcare market": As early as 1983 with the government's so-called "Modernization Programme" for the public sector, the ideology of neoliberalism has influenced public childcare in Denmark by the creation of market-like conditions in which the funding of day-care provision follow the individual child. In this way, all day-care providers are in a situation of mutual competition for the favour of the parents in order to secure funding and jobs in their own institution. The moment a day-care provider cannot attract enough children to sustain its economy it has to downsize its staff or find other ways of cutting down costs.

Increased evaluation and quality control: The introduction of the learning paradigm in the area of childcare was followed by a political and administrative emphasis on evaluation and documentation (Andersen 2011, 2013). The six focus-areas of the learning plans has increasingly been turned into targets according to which care workers can be monitored and assessed, and the last two decades have seen increased efforts to evaluate and measure each childcare institution according to how well it meets the standardised targets. (Andersen 2014, p. 96-98)

Decreased public spending: Another important structural factor in the area of contemporary public childcare is that the child-adult ratio in Danish childcare institutions has almost doubled over the last three centuries. For the young children in the nursery (0-3 years old) the development means that whereas in 1972 there was one adult to each 3.4 children, in 2016 the ratio was 6.3 children per adult (FOA 2017). This almost amounts to a doubling of the amount of children per adult staff member.

[2] In 2018 the political regulation of early-years childcare was reformed by the so-called "Strengthened Educational Learning-Plan" (Den styrkede pædagogiske læreplan), in which, among others things, children's well-being and children's own perspectives were given a larger role. This, however, has happened after I did my fieldwork, and the effect on the field of child-care is still uncertain. However, the strong emphasis on learning still permeates the legal text in which the word *learning* is mentioned 89 times, the word *care* is mentioned one time, the word *needs* is mentioned two times, and the word *well-being* is mentioned six times.

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

Research method

The data originates from a research project about the well-being and emotional life of children and adults in five Danish childcare institutions (Rasmussen, Chimirri, Juhl and Gitz-Johansen 2019). The present paper specifically draws on my own part of the project, which consisted of fieldwork in a nursery among the 0-2 year olds and their professional carers (Gitz-Johansen 2019a, 2019b). The focus of this research was to use insights from developmental psychology to study the emotional and psychological dimensions of early childcare, which has only been studied in a few other Danish research projects (Diderichsen 1991, Diderichsen and Thyssen 1991, Hansen 2013, Jacobi 1991, Jørgensen and Thyssen 1999, Thyssen 1991, Thyssen 1994). The present paper, however, will investigate the findings from the fieldwork using a psychosocial perspective in order to understand emotional processes among the staff in the nursery in the light of the political and institutional conditions.

The fieldwork was based on the method called infant observation, first developed at the Tavistock Institute by psychoanalyst Esther Bick (1962, 1964). Bick developed infant observation as part of the training of psychoanalysts, but in the recent decades the method has been used as a research tool, that enquires into the inner world of the infant as well as the dynamics between an infant and its carers (Gitz-Johansen 2017, Skogstad 2018). The original setting of infant observation was the home of the family and the parent-child relation, but later developments have used the method in other settings such as care-homes, schools, and infant nurseries (Rustin 1997, Adamo and Rustin 2014, Elfer 2006, 2007, 2010, 2018, Monti and Crudeli 2007, Seland, Sandseter and Bratterud 2015, Gitz-Johansen 2019a, 2019b). The method has also been adapted to broaden the focus to include not only the relation between an infant and its carer but also the institutional context of these relations (Hinselwood and Skogstad 2000, Hinselwood 2002) and the political and economic situation in which the institution is situated (Youell 2015).

The research project took place in an infant nursery for the zero to three year olds and their professional carers. In this nursery, the children were divided into two groups: The youngest, who were between six and 18 months, and the older children, who were approximately between 18 months and three years old. I chose to observe the youngest group and their carers. The number of children in the group varied between seven and nine children and they were typically looked after by two or three adult carers. The nursery was affiliated with a nearby kindergarten for the four to six year olds.

I visited the nursery 35 times over a period of 13 months. Each observation lasted an hour, after which I retreated to my car to write up notes from memory. I also had a small number of meetings with the manager and staff of the nursery, and I did a couple of presentations of my findings to the staff of the nursery and kindergarten. As mentioned, my project was part of a larger research project, which focused on the well-being of children in nursery and kindergarten (Rasmussen, Chimirri, Juhl and Gitz-Johansen 2019). As a part of this larger research project my fellow researchers and I did two workshops with staff members from the participating institutions, which was two nurseries and two kindergartens. During these workshops the researchers presented their findings and we listened to the comments and reflections of the participants from the nurseries and kindergartens.

Transference and countertransference

One thing that sets psychoanalytically informed fieldwork apart from other methods of fieldwork is the emphasis on including the reactions of the field to the observer (*transference*) as well as paying close

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

attention to the observer's emotional reactions to being in the field and receiving the projection from the participants in the field (*countertransference*) (Andersen 2018). In the discussion below, I primarily draw on the material obtained by observation and conversations in the field, but I also include my own reactions, wherever I feel they contribute to understanding what is going on in the emotional life of the nursery.

In order to reflect on my own countertransference to the field, I saw a psychoanalyst parallel to making observations and analysing the observation notes. Furthermore, I presented my observation notes to a supervisor who is a practicing psychoanalyst as well as trained in infant observation, and we discussed the observations as well as my own reactions. Ideally, when doing infant observations one would present one's observations as well as personal reactions to a psychoanalytically informed supervision group, who would offer their comments and association to the material presented (Skogstad 2018). However, I did not have access to such a group and had to work with one supervisor instead.

The de-symbolization of care and basic needs

During my observations in the nursery, the political focus on children's learning and competence development never became very visible in the day-to-day care work. My impression was that the essential task to which the staff committed themselves was not primarily concerned with learning and competence building but rather with caring for the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of the children. It seemed to me that the presence of the needs of young children is of such a nature that politically created plans and targets cannot easily overrule them. When a young child cries, the only thing an emphatic carer can really do is to try to find out what the child needs to feel better such as sleep, food, calming, comforting, encouragement, or entertainment. The focus of my research project was to investigate the emotional life of the nursery, and as a part of this, I found that the staff members used a large part of their working time to respond to and care for the fundamental psychological and emotional needs of the children (Gitz-Johansen 2019a, 2019b). The needs identified were the need for *emotional attachment*, *a secure base*, *play*, *emotional regulation* (e.g. comfort, calming down, or cheering up), *mentalising carers* (when the adults imagine and respond to the needs of the child), *emotionally attuned interactions*, and moments of *shared intersubjective attention*.

However, what I soon found out was that while the learning plans and the language of learning may not be visible in the day-to-day care of young children, they have the indirect influence of making it hard to talk about and recognize the day-to-day work of caring for their basic needs. The learning-paradigm has create a language in which learning and competence development are the goals and purpose of caring for young children and this makes it difficult to talk and think about the meaning of care-work in other terms. During the workshops that we did with staff-members from the participating institutions, several of the participants expressed that they lacked an adequate language to describe what they found to be the most important element of their job. One participant said: "We work in a profession, where it is hard to explain the more intangible part of our job." Other participants said, that the concept of learning has become so dominant in the field of public child-care that it has become difficult to speak about other aspects of their work, such as the care for children's emotional needs, which many participants saw as the central task: "If we don't tell the world what the most important things are then everything will be about learning. We have completely forgotten the fundamental things." At the workshop the manager of "my" nursery told us about how it is in fact possible to talk about caring for the children's needs when they talk

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

with each other in the nursery. However, as soon as one has to communicate with the outside world, such as parents, the local administration, and politicians one can only to talk in terms of learning:

"When at the administrative level we talk about our 'core task', we talk about learning. Between ourselves as staff of the nursery, we can talk about us as human beings, but we cannot communicate this to the outside world, and we feel isolated. (…) When we speak to other people who work with young children, we all understand how we work to help the children, but it is difficult to tell people in the outside world about this. This includes parents and politicians."

Borrowing a term from German psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer (1975) it seems that something essential in the work of caring for young children in Denmark has become "de-symbolised" by the learning-paradigm. The concept of de-symbolisation describes how experiences may lose an adequate language of expression, which is an essential part of the act of repression. In Lorenzer's words: "repression is the exclusion from communication by language." (p. 131) This de-symbolization makes it difficult to talk about and communicate what many of the staff members (and many developmental psychologists will agree) view as the most fundamentally important part of their work. The learning-paradigm also makes the emotional pressures on the staff as well as their emotional needs invisible and culturally unconscious.

In my own emotional responses to being in the field (countertransference), I felt this collective de-symbolisation of young children's emotional needs as an overpowering sense of frustration and powerlessness about the distance between my experiences in the nursery and the public and current political discourse. While the political language (and much academic language) has to do with children's learning, the reality I experienced in the nursery was a daily struggle to care for the basic emotional needs of young children, who had been left by their parents in the care of a group of professionals that were at times struggling to cope with the burden of the task. It was also evident, that the staff members felt a concern for the children's basic needs. When, for instance, I ask a staff member when the youngest child is typically delivered to them in the morning she answers, that it is typically around 8:30 am, and she adds: "It hurts in my heart but there is nothing one can do about it." On a later occasion, I meet the same staff-member in the wardrobe where she is rocking a pram with a young boy in. The boy started in nursery a few days ago, and today he has been upset since he was delivered to them by his father, and now the staff member is trying to make him fall asleep. The staff member tells me that the boy's father has promised that he will not pick up the boy too late today, but she then mentions that in only a couple of days the boy has to get used to being in the nursery for longer hours because then his father goes back to working full time. "It is tough" she says, and she mentions that she wishes that the parents would take the time that the child needs to get used to being in institution. Some weeks later she same staff member tells me, that some days she comes home from work feeling totally wiped out and burdened by the feeling that she has given the children all she could give but that it just was not enough. Another day, I talk to two other staff-members who tell me that a new boy will soon start in the nursery. They have heard that this boy has some problems (I do not catch what kind of problems they mean). They are worried because they expect this boy to be an extra burden for them, and they already feel that they have enough to deal with. One of them tells me that that the boy is only seven months old and says that she does not understand how parents can put their children in full day-care when the child is this young. "It is far too early", she says.

These comments show, that even though the concern for children's basic emotional and psychological need are not very visible in the official discourse and directives in the field of public day-care,

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

these concerns are very present among the staff members, who nevertheless find their experience and concerns rendered invisible by the dominant discourse.

Uncontained care and marked-like conditions

Institutionalised public day-care in Denmark is politically structured in ways that make it operate like a quasi-marked in which each institution is in competition with one another for children and resources. The market-like conditions that the nursery is operating under exerts certain pressures on the institution and its staff, and this is especially noticeable in times of "child shortage". No doubt, some institutions are able to consistently attract enough children to be able to feel secure from the threat of child-shortage and the resulting financial strains and possible need to downsize the staff. However, the nursery in which the fieldwork was done found itself in a less fortunate position, and the number of new young children had been declining for some time. The explanation that the staff gave me for this development was that the number of young children was falling in the local area and, furthermore, many parents preferred nurseries closer to their home. Whatever the reasons from the child-shortage this development put the nursery under a considerable pressure to perform well in order to attract new children. Also, in order to avoid staff reductions the nursery's manager felt forced to accept all the new babies it could get even if this meant that the staff had to deal with several new babies in the group who were not yet used to being away from their parents. This led to a period in which I witnessed an increasing amount of crying and other signs of distress among the children, which led to increased exhaustion among the staff. The exhaustion sometimes meant that the staff were less able to contain and soothe the children's distress and instead became more irritated and strict with them. The following is an extract of my observation-notes during this period:

"A lot of crying children can be heard in the nursery today. (…) *My impression is that the children are tired, hungry, and the "newcomers" do not feel secure in the unfamiliar room with unfamiliar adults and other children. As soon as one of the children starts crying the staff member moves closer to this child, turns her face to him or her, and includes the child's name in the song. By doing so, the crying of this particular child is kept at bay but then the other children are left with less comfort and stimulation from the staff member and her song and some of them begin to cry.* [Lunch arrives and the children eats while the staff tries to keep them from crying] *The children have now finished eating but some of them are still crying. The adults hurry from one child to another and try to comfort them, while at the same time clean up the tables after lunch, clean the children, change diapers, get them in their pyjamas, put them in their prams, and get them to settle down and fall asleep. During all of this, they have to try to comfort crying children here and there. One of the staff members who is carrying a child on her arms passes by another child, who looks as if she is about to cry, and the staff member says to the child in a very stern voice that now she is not to begin to cry too. I get the feeling that this staff member is about to reach her limit of what she can cope with; the level of stress that comes from the crying children is making her increasingly upset and she seems about to get irritated or angry. A while later calm is finally settling over the nursery as some of the children have been put down to sleep in their prams, but now one of the girls, who is sitting on the floor starts crying. The staff member's face now looks angry, and she tells the girl off angrily, but then she stops herself and says something kind and puts the girl down on a mattress with some toys. In the midst of the stressed and hectic atmosphere, she grips the girl too hard and the girl starts crying. Even though she is visibly stressed and under pressure the staff member again gets her temper under control and talks calmingly to the crying girl*

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

who then stops crying. As an observer to this situation I feel dizzy, stressed, and exhausted by the hectic atmosphere, the crying, and the constant threat of one or more children starting to cry."

This example, taken from my field-notes, gives an impression of what some of the days were like during the time of an increased pressure on the nursery due to the extra children they were forced to accept for financial reasons. During this period, I felt that it was hard to endure the emotional effect on me as an observer of the increased distress and crying among the children. The increased amount of crying and distress among the children was affecting me on infantile levels of my personality, and I needed time to process this and recover. I have no doubt that some of this "countertransference" (how I as an observer was affected by being in the field) was produced by a resonance with unconscious emotional traces from my personal early childhood. However, in retrospect it is also my impression that the lack of care for the staff and their increasing need for care and containment made it harder and harder for me to act as an emotionally attuned witness, which is demanded by the infant observation method. The staff members had to care for the increased number of new young children who were often less than one year old. At the same time, they had to present a favourable image of themselves and the nursery to the parents (the customers) in order to try to secure their jobs. There were no structures in place to take care of or even recognize the emotions and needs of the staff members, which were thereby left both wordless (un-symbolised) and uncontained. During this time, nobody asked the staff members how they were doing or what their needs were, and they were left to try to provide good-enough care for the strong needs of the new and "older" children in the nursery. As an empathetic observer, I often felt guilty for witnessing this situation without being able to do anything to help the staff except for being an empathic witness. At one point, however, I had to take a break from the observations in order to take care of myself and try to figure out how I was being affected by the field. As I returned to the nursery after a few weeks pause, I discovered that the three staff members that I had followed were all gone from the nursery. They were either off sick or they had asked to be transferred to the kindergarten (in Danish "børnehave"), that provides care for the 3-6 year olds. My impression was that the pressure of caring for too many newcomers had also been too much for them to cope with.

During the fieldwork, I was struck by the discrepancy between the staff member's need for containment and support on the one hand and the actual lack of containment and support on the other. The market-like circumstances positions the staff members as care-providers, who are expected to perform well in order to attract customers. This position makes it difficult to acknowledge and tend to the pressures intrinsic to the work of caring for young children and to recognize the needs of the carers. As the above example shows, the increased pressure on the staff and the lack of care for their needs sometimes resulted in a treatment of the children, which was less caring and less responsive than what I would witness during periods with less stress and more resources (e.g. during public holidays in which the child-to-adult ratio was more favourable).

The pressures inherent in caring for young children are not unique to the nursery. Menzies Lyth writes that child-care is an extremely demanding task, and she argues that present society offers little acknowledgement of the pressures of the task or the support-needs of the carers: "To be a mother is extremely demanding and it would be difficult to overestimate her need for support and comfort. (…) Unfortunately, the context which society provides for the support of the mother tends to be defective in certain ways and may add to rather than diminish stress." (Menzies Lyth 1988, p. 216-217) Menziers Lyth

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

points out that one of the key need of parents of young children is the need for emotional support for themselves. Caring for young children places considerable emotional pressure on the parents, which means that parents need emotional containment themselves in order to provide good enough care for the young children. The same is true for professional caregivers, and, as discussed above, caring for young children means working in the middle of children's strong and unmediated emotional needs, which in itself is a considerable challenge. Moreover, the work may activate the caregiver's own infantile needs, which means that they in turn need care and containment from other adults.

Caring under scrutiny

Another stress-factor in the nursery was that around the time of my arrival in the nursery the management had received an evaluation report from the local authorities that had contained critical remarks about the quality of the work carried out in the institution. The evaluation of the nursery was done by external professionals, who had used a tool for assessing and monitoring quality in day-care institutions called KIDS (Ringsmose and Kragh-Müller 2014). This assessment tool evaluates the work of the care staff in order to enable them to do better, if they are not performing according to the standards of the tool. The KIDS-tool scores the institution on a variety of quality parameters, which enables the local authorities to monitor and follow up on how the institution is performing. I did not learn what the exact feedback from the evaluation had been. At the time, I felt that the relationship between the staff members and me became more tense and awkward. The staff would often act more stiffly when I was around, and sometimes they would send me rapid sideways glances as if to see if I was looking at them. On my part, I would often feel than I was disturbing their work and intruding into a private space, which made me feel tense. Some amount of uneasiness and tension was present from the start of the fieldwork, which can be linked to the fact that the manager of the nursery had granted me access whereas the individual staff members probably felt less enthusiastic about my presence. However, until this point nobody had ever made any remarks to me to suggest that my presence was not welcome, or that they were worried about what observations I made. This changed when the results of the evaluation report were presented to the staff, at which point the three staff members, who were the main carers for the group of children I was observing, asked to have a meeting with me. They explained that they would like to know what I had observed so far, and we therefore organized a meeting. At the meeting, they told me about the negative assessment that the nursery had received and that this had made them nervous about what I was actually observing, and what my conclusions were. Behind these worries, I sensed a nervousness about whether the local authorities would read my conclusions and if this would reflect negatively on them and potentially endanger their employment. In my feedback to them at this meeting, I took great care in showing empathy for their situation and an understanding for demanding nature of their work as well as pressures they were working under. My feeling was that this conversation created a sense of trust between us, and they got a sense that I was on "their side" and not a critical observer who would assess the quality of their work and report it to somebody on the management level or in the local authorities.

Skogstad emphasises that when observing an institution, the reaction of participants in the field to an observer are in themselves important information about the institution's emotional life: "The observer is experienced in some way, and whatever influence he or she has, the impact will always be based on the transference of a whole group or of individuals within the institution and on the unconscious phantasies active in the group." (Skogstad 2018, p. 118) My suggestion is that what was transferred onto

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

me as observer was an expectation of being critically examined and evaluated by potentially powerful external observers. This suggests that their expectations towards management and local authorities are less an image of caring superiors and a supportive system, but rather an image of critical and potentially punitive authorities. This impression is supported by my notes from the meeting with the three staff members mentioned above:

"*I tell them about my impression of their situation that the staff members have to care for the needs of the children while they themselves do not get much support and care from the management-level. They agree with me about this vision of their situation. They tell me that their impression is that the local authorities are putting pressure on their manager to perform better, and the manager passes this pressure on to the staff. One of the staff members says that she feels like whatever they do they never perform well enough. This means that the staff members rely mostly on the support they can give to each other since management and the local authorities are not providing them with any support or care.*"

While all Danish childcare institutions are probably not sharing this situation, many public servants can probably recognize the situation in which one's performance is being measured and critically scrutinized by authorities. Cooper and Lees (2015) have suggested, that the recent shift in public management towards New Public Management, with its increased focus on evaluation, accountability, and performance targets, has given rise to new forms of professional anxieties, which are predominantly *persecutory* . One fears being professionally criticized and possibly losing one's job. From my observations, I agree with Cooper and Lees that this institutional anxiety is less linked to the individual members of the staff but must rather be understood as a collective anxiety, which is produced by being a participant in a public sector that is increasingly governed by systems of assessment and evaluation.

Conclusion

The findings discussed above contribute to a small but growing field of research that uses institutional observation to investigate the emotional life of institutions. Furthermore, this study points to the importance of including the political context in the analysis of public institutions. The study has shown how the daily emotional life in the nursery is influenced by the different external pressures, to which decades of a largely neo-liberal policy is exposing them. The dominant discourse of learning and competence development de-symbolises the basic emotional and psychological needs of the children, and the staff are left to take care of the children's needs for attachment, security, empathy, attention, and comfort, without an official language for or recognition of these needs and pressures. I have also shown how this particular institution have very keenly felt the exposure to market-like conditions, in which each institution competes with neighbouring institutions over the amount of children and declining financial resources. As a result, the staff were struggling, which would sometimes affect the quality of their care for the children, but no support structure was put in place to take care of the needs of the carers to help them care for the needs of the children. Lastly, I have discussed how the form of public governance, which evaluates and assesses the performance of the public institutions with a critical gaze, has created an anxious atmosphere among the staff, in which management and external agencies are viewed as a source of threat rather than a source of care and support.

One may surmise from above discussions, that it is essential to recognize that psychological containment is what Rustin calls "an onion-like phenomenon", with several layers folding around each

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

other (Rustin 2011). The staff's work of caring for the children is embedded in institutional and political conditions that may act to support their work or it may increase pressures and anxieties. One important thing to notice is how the staff's reactions to the results of a quality report from the local authority were coloured by fears of being criticised and possibly facing negative sanctions. What the staff seemed to need (apart from more staff members) was to get a kind of support from their management and local administration that would recognise the pressures and stresses of their work, as well as recognize the connection between the wellbeing of the children and the wellbeing of the staff.

References

Adamo, SMG. and Rustin M. (eds.) (2014) *Young Child Observation: A Development in the theory and method of infant observation*, London: Karnac Books.

Andersen, L. (2018) 'Psychoanalytic Ethnography', in K Stamenova and RD Hinselwood: *Methods of research into the unconscious*, London and New York: Routledge.

Andersen, PØ. (2011) *Pædagogikken i evalueringssamfundet*, København: Hans Reitzel.

Andersen, PØ. (2013) *Pædagogiske læreplaner, dokumentation og evaluering*, København: Hans Reitzel.

Andersen, PØ. (2014). 'Udvikling af selvforståelse og identitet i barndommen - individuelt og kollektivt', in K Illeris (ed.): *Læring i konkurrencestaten*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.

Apple, M. (2006): 'Producing inequalities: Neo-liberalism, neo-conservativism, and the politics of educational reform', in H Lauder, P Brown, J-A Dillabough, and AH Halsey (eds.): *Education, Globalization and Social Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bick, E. (1964) 'Notes on infant observation in psycho-analytic training', in A Briggs (ed.): *Surviving Space: Papers on Infant Observation*, London: Karnac.

Bick, E. (1962) 'Child analysis today', in A Briggs (ed.): *Surviving Space: Papers on Infant Observation*, London: Karnac.

Cooper, A. and Lees, A. (2015) 'Spotlit: defences against anxiety in contemporary human service organizations', in D Armstrong and M Rustin (Eds.). *Social defences against anxiety: Explorations in a paradigm*, London: Karnac Books.

Diderichsen, A. (1991) *Omsorg for de 2-6 årige: Børns omsorgsbehov – set gennem børnenes egne udtryk*, København: Danmarks Pædagogiske Institut.

Diderichsen, A. and Thyssen S. (1991) *Omsorg og udvikling*, København: Danmarks Pædagogiske

Institut.

Elfer, P. (2006) 'Exploring children's expressions of attachment in nursery', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol. 14, No. 2, p. 81-95

Elfer, P. (2007) 'What are nurseries for? The concept of primary task and its application in differentiating roles and tasks in nurseries'. *Journal of early childhood research*, vol. 5(2), p. 169–188

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

Elfer, P. (2010) 'The power of psychoanalytic conceptions in understanding nurseries', *Infant Observation*, vol. 13, No. 1, April, p. 59-63

Elfer, P. (2018) 'The contribution of psychoanalytically informed observation methodologies in nursery organisations', in K Stamenova and RD Hinselwood: *Methods of research into the unconscious*, London and New York: Routledge.

FOA (2017): *Der er mindre tid til børnene - antal personaletimer pr. barn på daginstitutionsområdet siden 1972*. Copenhagen: FOA.

Gitz-Johansen, T. (2017) De 0-2 årige småbørns perspektiver, in J Kampmann, K Rasmussen and H Warming: *Interview med Børn*, København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Gitz-Johansen, T. (2019a): *Vuggestueliv: Omsorg, Følelser og Relationer*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.

Gitz-Johansen, T. (2019b): Vuggestuebørns følelsesmæssige behov, in K Rasmussen, N Chimirri, P Juhl and T Gitz-Johansen: *Har du det godt? Om at have det godt i daginstitutionens hverdag*, Frederikshavn: Dafolo.

Hansen, OH. (2013) *Stemmer i fællesskabet*. PhD-dissertation, København: Institut for Uddannelse og Pædagogik, Aarhus Universitet.

Hinselwood, RD. (2002) 'Applying the observational method: Observing organisations', in A Briggs (ed.): *Surviving Space: Papers on Infant Observation*, London: Karnac.

Hinselwood, RD. and Skogstad W. (eds.) (2000) *Observing Organizations: Anxiety, defence, and culture in health care*, Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Jacobi, A. (1991): *Omsorg for de 2-6 årige. Vol. 3: Omsorgsarbejdet og omsorgsformer i daginstitutionen*, København: Danmarks Pædagogiske Institut.

Johansen, ET. (2020). 'Før de pædagogiske læreplaner i daginstitutioner'. *Dansk Pædagogisk Historisk Forening #nyhedsbrev*, March.

Jørgensen, JC. and Thyssen S. (1999) *Barnets første tid i vuggestuen*. København: Danmarks Pædagogiske Institut.

Lorenzer, A. (1975). *Sprogbeskadigelse og Rekonstruktion*, Humlebæk: Rhodos.

Menzies Lyth, I. (1988) *Containing anxiety in institutions, selected essays vol. 1*, London: Free Association Books

Monti, F. and Crudeli F. (2007) 'The use of infant observation in nursery (0-3 years)'. *International Journal of Infant Observation and Its Applications*. Volume 10, Issue 1. 51-58.

NOSOSKO (2014): *Social tryghed i de nordiske lande 2012/13: Omfang, udgifter og finansiering*. Copenhagen: Nordisk Socialstatistisk Komité.

Page, S. (1999). *The Shadow and the Counsellor: Working with the Darker Aspects of the Person, Role and Profession.* London & New York: Routledge.

Pedersen, OK. (2011). *Konkurrencestaten*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087

Petersen, A. (2016). *Præstationssamfundet*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Rasmussen, K., Chimirri, N., Juhl, P., and Gitz-Johansen, T. (2019) *Har du det godt? Om at have det godt i daginstitutionens hverdag,* Frederikshavn: Dafolo.

Ringsmose, C. and Kragh-Müller G. (2014) *KIDS - Kvalitetsudvikling i daginstitutioner*, København: Dansk Psykologisk Forlag.

Rustin, M. (1997) 'What do we see in the nursery? Infant observation as "laboratory work"'. *Infant Observation*, Vol. 1, nr. 1, p. 93-110

Rustin, M. (2011) 'Passion in the classroom: Understanding some vicissitudes in teacher-pupil relationships and the unavoidable anxieties of learning', in R Harris, S Rendall and S Nashat (eds.): *Engaging with complexity: Child and adolescent mental health and education*, London: Karnac.

Seland, M., Sandseter EBH. and Bratterud, Å. (2015) 'One- to three-year-old children's experience of subjective wellbeing in day care'. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, vol. 16, nr. 1, p. 70–83

Skogstad, W. (2018) 'Psychoanalytic observation: The mind as a research instrument', in K Stamenova and RD Hinselwood: *Methods of research into the unconscious*, London and New York: Routledge.

Thyssen, S. (1991): *Omsorg for de 2-6 årige: Omsorg i et udviklingsmæssigt perspektiv*. København: Danmarks Pædagogiske Institut.

Thyssen, S. (1994): *Omsorg skaber udvikling: Om 1,5–2,5 årige børn*. København: Danmarks Pædagogiske Institut.

Weber, CH., Krog, K-L. and Larsen, SA. (2019) *Dagtilbud i Norden: Rammer for dagtilbud i Danmark og Norge*. Copenhagen: Tænketanken DEA.

Youell, B. (2015): 'The impact of the global financial crisis on children and families as seen through infant observations in three European countries: The role of education professionals in containing anxiety and holding on to hope and hopefulness'. *Infant Observation*, 18(2), 154–166.

This document the the author's post-acceptance version and it is not to be cited.

© Thomas Gitz-Johansen, 2020. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Journal og Psycho-Social Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 263-276, 2020, **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087